Ken Follett

A Contractor's View of Craft Training

James Marston Fitch, commenting on the need for a national program of training of craftspersons, has noted the following: "Such young workers as are entering this very important area are doing so on a personal, ad hoc basis, picking up what training may be assimilated by observation and apprenticeship in small, scattered restoration projects." This is true.

The September/October issue of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's newsletter, *forum news*, contains a chart of degree programs in historic preservation. Of the 60 programs listed, two programs indicate that they provide hands-on training. I find this disheartening. It appears that a large number of consultants are going to be produced, and that only a small amount of resources are going into assuring a future supply of skilled craftspeople. The question I have is, where do we all expect the craftspeople to arrive from? Where will those individuals who are essential to actually do all the fine restoration work that the best and brightest have been trained, at great expense, to eloquently chatter about, spontaneously going to appear from... if there is not a conscious intent on the part of those with the monetary resources to develop a skilled workforce capable of doing the work?

Sadly, I imagine Mr. Fitch felt compelled to hedge his bet on the future of the preservation industry, since he was not able to say that droves of energetic young workers are flooding the preservation trades, and that these droves can expect to make a decent living and receive the enduring respect of our nation. Indeed, I can attest the opposite from personal experience. The very idea that any modestly literate young individual should choose anything but a college education seems to run contrary to an economically-driven myth of our education system. (In crude terms, I think the myth runs something like: Pay up, and we will teach you how to capture the golden goose.) As well, respect paid to the trade of an artisan becomes a threat to the dreams of hard-working parents. Parents who work with their hands, especially, hope their children will not follow them in a career of physical labor.

Why is the preservation industry so incredibly lopsided in favor of intellectual occupations, to the neglect of hands-on craft?

Henry Miller, in one of his less erotic and potentially more lucid moments, suggested that children should be taught first to use a hammer. Children should not only be taught to use a hammer, but taught with pride to use a hammer in the best way possible, to build or rebuild in their own environment. Instead, children are taught to build with virtual hammers in an imaginary world where there is no pain, no gain, no blood or mud.

I have not met many people who think that a young person following a trade career is not headed on a difficult way in life, especially where higher education is available. Granted, physical labor makes a person tired. But it does not reduce brain cells. On the other hand, too much schooling can dull the senses, inhibit thirst for life, and inflate an individual's self-importance. And however much is spent on an education, it does not increase the quantity of brain cells.

The harsh reality of years working as a stonemason, including a lot of backache and bashed thumbs, defines the framework by which I gauge education in the preservation trades. It is also the basis of a complex set of rules, gained by experience, that I apply when I evaluate the competence of individuals, including design professionals, to do historic preservation work. A favorite tool of mine is to ask people their opinion of the intelligence of a wet rock as opposed to a dry rock. The test is to see if the individual can think outside of a standard framework, how creative are they, can they laugh, and do they have character. Character, desire, and a good attitude, in my opinion, rule over technical competence, which can be learned. I don't look for people that simply go through motions without asking questions.

Sometimes the patronizing of craftspeople takes another form. From a lack of life experience, the book-educated take refuge in a hearty, back-slapping idealization of the craftsperson as an updated version of the Natural Man. This mythologizing of hands-on craft fosters a trend whereby middle-class youth complete their undergraduate studies and then take up their great-grandfather's tools. Hands-on work is not a refuge in a simpler life and it is unfortunate if a vital national resource, the skilled craftsperson working in traditional trades, is allowed to be stereotyped as a theme worker whereby anyone can take it up as a hobby.

Construction contracting is not trivial; it is highly complex and demanding. There is an undeniable amount of pain in the fully engaged practice of hoisting two cement bags at one time; this is

not a pursuit that comes easy. Progress is measured, not by a high grade-point average, but by food on the table. The gap between those who design and those who implement, between those who think about it and those who have a constant backache and dirty hands, is a convergence of two economic classes. The educational ideals of these two classes, totally foreign, collide at the building site. And neither system of ideals seems disposed to admit the validity of the other. There are few exceptions.

A few educational programs are made accessible to the trades, but nowhere near enough to satisfy the actual needs of the preservation industry. Also, these craft training programs, which emphasize technique, do not provide a remedy for the problems of career valuation in our society. They do not motivate the creation of stonemasons and carpenters out of a world of television advertisements for sneakers. They do not get involved in a young person's life early enough to create that first life altering spark, the flaming desire that causes an individual to drop other future prospects in order to pursue careers as craftspeople.

In the United States I do not see a national program of training craftspersons in preservation trades, such as Mr. Fitch recommends, and I do not believe there ever will be one. Despite this, the example of Europe in many ways provides an inspiration for all of us. An associate of mine, a Polish-trained preservation architect, told me that after World War II his people had no choice but to start a national preservation program, 40 years prior to America getting warm on the idea. The reason they had no choice was that they had lost everything. As a society, they felt a very human compulsion to rebuild their past, with an intensity of spirit that I believe is exceedingly rare.

As a contractor, I employ mechanics trained in hands-on application, and I perceive craft training programs as supplemental to an ongoing day-to-day training mission internal to our company. The important questions when workers return from a training class are, "What did you learn? What can you teach? Who did you talk to? Who can you call? Was it worth it? Did you have a good time?" If the answers sound muddled, then we have to question either the ability of the worker to learn or the ability of the educator to teach. Sometimes the students return with enthusiasm to teach their peers on the work site, and sometimes they are deathly silent. Attitude counts for most everything.

In the late 1980s in New York City, with a downturn of construction following on the jitters of an overinflated market, droves of workers, finding themselves suddenly unemployed, stampeded out of the construction industry, not to return. For the most part, I do not see this as a loss to historic preservation, as there was little gained by the preservation industry to begin with. These were not individuals who were drawn to the business simply because they felt it was the right thing to do to fix up old buildings—they were workers putting one foot in front of the other and expecting good wages, health benefits, and a pension. Amazingly, these middle-class workers, suddenly without work, saw no honor in poverty. Their exodus from the trades drew into the preservation industry large numbers of immigrant workers. Many of these workers begin without the needed skills and acquire them, if they are lucky, on the job. The unlucky ones are put to work by contractors who don't know how to do the job, either.

This brings us to the issue of contractor prequalification, which speaks directly to the need of the preservation industry to maintain a resource of workers skillful enough to do the right thing. The only way a skilled work force can be maintained is by making sure that skill is a factor in getting the work. If low cost, and not quality and experience, are the determining factors in the allocation of work, then skilled craftspeople and responsible preservation contractors cannot compete against unskilled laborers and inexperienced general contractors. Unless design professionals and property owners become more aware of the different skill levels among providers of construction services, the preservation industry will not be healthy. There will be a lot of desire, a lot of need, and no satisfaction. Too often, design professionals and property owners seem to be unaware of the difference or of what is at stake.

Of course, my bias is showing—I have to deal with this every day.

We have to show respect for the trades. Those who understand the world through their hands and shape the language of materials in our buildings, don't deserve to be treated poorly. Without a clearer understanding, the preservation industry will remain the responsibility of individuals with a desire—or those driven by the concrete immediacy of survival as best possible—along with the example of some contracting organizations that build, train, and maintain a work force capable of doing the bull work of historic preservation.

Ken Follett is Vice President of Apple Restorations and Waterproofing, Inc., Brooklyn, New York , Founder of the Preservation Industry Network, New York, and on the Board of Directors of the Association for Preservation Technology International (1997-98).